



## Bridgewater Review

---

Volume 34 | Issue 1

Article 8

---

May-2015

# Short Fiction: Ulmus

Ward Heilman

*Bridgewater State University*, [wheilman@bridgew.edu](mailto:wheilman@bridgew.edu)

---

### Recommended Citation

Heilman, Ward (2015). Short Fiction: Ulmus. *Bridgewater Review*, 34(1), 24-25.

Available at: [http://vc.bridgew.edu/br\\_rev/vol34/iss1/8](http://vc.bridgew.edu/br_rev/vol34/iss1/8)

This item is available as part of Virtual Commons, the open-access institutional repository of Bridgewater State University, Bridgewater, Massachusetts.

---

# SHORT FICTION

## Ulmus

Ward Heilman

Some people pursue butterflies; some gather stamps. Some chase knowledge to build low walls; others collect adventures to stack one upon another in a fortune tower of experience: from the garret come stories of princesses. Stirp pursued trees.

Long before he moved to the forests, he knew it must be trees for him. As a child in the hot, dry plain he watched the desert plants day after day. They didn't grow. They didn't even seem to move. He dared not water them. Then one evening, unexpectedly, just after some distant object cast a shadow across it, a plant flowered. It burst out in bright purple.

Carefully he took off his shoes, sat down before it and waited. Some mystery was to be explained, he thought. He felt he deserved some account of why.

When the full darkness came he could no longer see the flower, no matter how hard he looked.

Once, for just a moment, he drifted off to sleep. His head rolled to the side; his dead hand flopped to the ground. As his fingers came back to life they touched what seemed to be a snake in the sand. He quickly yanked his hand up, then slowly reached down with two fingers to pick up the thin end of a smooth stick.

In the morning, when the first indirect light dimly lit the desert, the flower glowed blue briefly before folding up completely at the first brightness. Stirp moved his trunk to block the rays but the flower never peeked out. Not then, nor that evening, nor ever again.

An American elm, *Ulmus Americana*, with a graceful vase-shaped stem. Near the ground it divides into many parts; above, its limbs spread out large and full. No sign of disease. It is separate but not by itself. Over there is another not quite as tall. And some newer ones, back in, just beyond the ironwood, *Carpinus Caroliniana*. Stirp loved to stroke the deep ripples and sinews of the smooth, grey bark – ironwood, *Carpinus* – as he searched for the catkins dangling inconspicuously. What fawn nibbled and left this remnant of a shoot? Who stole the secret of that nutshell? The trees changed and gave some vague answers with the seasons.

The egg-shaped head of the sugar maple, *Acer Saccharum*, listened with many-lobed leaves. Stirp sat silent, sensing the dryads in the maples and hearing the sap practicing its kiss.

After a while he stopped going back to town. He stayed in the bower. *Ulmus* provided seeds and small fruit. Nuts came from *Carpinus* and for his thirst there were *Saccharum*.

He tended the trees as he knew how. They did not need him. The bigger ones had been there before he came and the little ones did not always grow when he helped. It would be impossible for him to move the elm by himself, he thought, or any of the large trees, although they would look better rearranged, particularly the elm. He did transplant the smaller ones but they often caught disease and wizened.

In time, Stirp took his son to the woods but he could not explain the trees to him. His son always saw stout boughs to shape into broadswords, springy branches for bows or long limbs for lances, leaves were camouflage, and roots rifles. Yet, Stirp noticed, for his son the trees always clapped hands and danced. Later his son made a flute from a lance and a harp from a bow, and the trees sang.

Once, Stirp put a huge pan in the grassy area near the elm. He filled it with all the wonderful, imaginary food he could think of. Under it he lit a fire of air and let it play on the kindling, twigs, sticks, branches and logs. He harvested fifth-year fruit. He laid out his earthenware and made place markers – *Ulmus* on the left, *Carpinus* and *Saccharum* interspersed.

He hoped the trees would come to his function. Perhaps they would arrange themselves properly.

Though the winds and worms encouraged them, the trees did not move. Stirp got only dead brambles and vines. He did not sit long this time. Before the darkness came, he left.



When he returned, the pan was overturned. Something else seemed different. Things seemed to have rearranged themselves, he thought, but he was not sure he remembered. His utensils were definitely not where he left them. There was a pile of earthenware dishes, used and dirty as if marked by leaf prints.

He had not had anything to eat or drink because he had waited for his guests. He approached a *Saccharum* and sipped some syrup. It left a metallic taste in his mouth. He looked up at a *Carpinus*.

He saw that things were not the same. All was still. A blue, earthenware cup rested on its side in the wet, green grass where, he was now sure, the elm had stood.

In another place, *Ulmus*, the great elm, was now surrounded by the ironwoods. The sugar maples were grouped around the outside. Their boughs by Autumn lit up like flaming swords.

*Ward Heilman is Professor in the Department of Mathematics and in the Department of Computer Science.*